



Improved Physical Activity and Diet in Elementary School Children

Public Health Problem

Over the past two decades, childhood overweight has steadily increased, and the increase in childhood diabetes has become alarming. These changes have highlighted the importance of developing and disseminating effective programs to increase physical activity and improve diet among children and to coordinate health messages in schools and communities.

Taking Action

Under the auspices of the National Institutes of Health, researchers at the University of Texas Health Science Center, in collaboration with experts from Tulane University, the University of California at San Diego, and the University of Minnesota, developed the Coordinated Approach to Child Health (CATCH), an interdisciplinary program for elementary schools. CATCH is designed to improve environmental influences to support behavior change. The program emphasizes decreasing consumption of high-fat foods and increasing physical activity both inside and outside of school.

With support from CDC, the Prevention Research Center at the University of Texas Health Science Center at Houston sought to disseminate, implement, and institutionalize CATCH in elementary schools. Partnerships to disseminate CATCH included the Texas Department of Health; Texas Education Agency; Paso del Norte Health Foundation; National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute; American Heart Association; Texas Medical Association; Bexar County Community Health Collaborative; and other organizations.

Initial implementation of CATCH resulted in a 10% increase in the time that participating children spent engaged in moderate to vigorous physical activity within physical education classes, as well as a significant decrease in fat consumption in school meals. A follow-up study indicated a persistent increase in physical activity and reduction in fat intake over the next three years without additional intervention.

Implications and Impact

In Texas alone, more than 1,500 elementary schools (approximately one-third of all schools) have adopted CATCH, thereby potentially reaching more than 750,000 school children. Schools in Illinois, Maine, Florida, Georgia, North Dakota, North Carolina, and New Mexico also have begun to use the program. The U.S. Department of Defense uses it in 320 of its overseas elementary schools.

In seven years, LFP progressed from implementation at one site to 64 community sites (49 in Washington alone), and the program currently has 2,550 seniors enrolled in six states. The National Council on Aging recognizes the program as one of the top 10 physical activity programs for U.S. seniors.

Contact Information

University of Washington Health Promotion Research Center
 1107 NE 45th Street - Suite 200 - Seattle, Washington 98105
 Campus Mailbox: 354804
 Phone: (206) 543-2891 - <http://depts.washington.edu/hprc/>
<http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/exemplary>